

# Strategies For Countering Radical Islamist Ideologies:

## Overcoming Conceptual Difficulties,

by Raymond Ibrahim

The greatest hurdle Americans need to get over in order to properly respond to the growing threat of radical Islam is purely intellectual in nature; specifically, it is epistemological, and revolves around the abstract realm of “knowledge.” Before attempting to formulate a long-term strategy to counter radical Islam, Americans must first and foremost understand Islam, particularly its laws and doctrines, the same way Muslims understand it—without giving it undue Western (liberal) interpretations. This is apparently not as simple as expected: all peoples of whatever civilizations and religions tend to assume that other peoples more or less share in their worldview, which they assume is objective, including notions of right and wrong, good and bad.

The mainstream interpretation, particularly in academia, of radical Islam is that it is a byproduct of various sorts of discontent (economic, political, social) and has little to do with the religion itself. To trace “jihadist” violence to Islam itself is discouraged; in academia, it may be treated as anathema.

Americans think this way because the secular, Western experience has been such that people respond with violence primarily when they feel they are politically, economically, or socially oppressed. While true that many non-Western peoples may fit into this paradigm, the fact is, the ideologies of radical Islam have the intrinsic capacity to prompt Muslims to violence and intolerance vis-à-vis the “other,” irrespective of grievances. Obviously, when radical Islam is coupled with a sense of grievance—real or imagined—the result is even more dramatic.

Conceptually, then, it must be first understood that many of the problematic ideologies associated with radical Islam trace directly back to Islamic law, or *sharia*. Jihad as offensive warfare to subjugate “infidels” (non-Muslims); mandated social discrimination against non-Muslim minorities living in Muslim nations (the regulations governing *ahl al-dhimma*); general animosity and lack of sincere cooperation vis-à-vis non-Muslims (as articulated in the doctrine of [\*al-wala’ we al-bara’\*](#))—all of these are clearly defined aspects that have historically been part of Islam’s worldview and not “open to interpretation.”

For example, the obligation to wage expansionist jihad is as “open to interpretation” as the obligation to perform the Five Pillars of Islam, such as praying and fasting. The same textual sources and methods of jurisprudence that have made it clear that prayer and fasting are obligatory, have also made it clear that jihad is also obligatory; the only difference is that, whereas prayer and fasting is an “individual” duty, jihad is understood to be a “communal” duty (a *fard kifaya*).

The prophet of Islam, Muhammad himself said: “He who wages jihad in the path of Allah — and Allah knows who it is who wages jihad in his path — is *as commendable as one who continuously fasts and prays* [emphasis added]. Allah guarantees if he who fights for his cause dies, he [Allah] will usher him into paradise; otherwise, he will return him to his home safely, with rewards or war booty.”

By and large, then, to assert that radical Islamic groups, such as al-Qaeda, have “hijacked” or “distorted” Islam is unsatisfactory.<sup>1</sup> They and others have spent much time and effort justifying their actions via Islamic law, and have been by and large successful.<sup>2</sup> The unique role radical groups have been playing since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is not so much distorting Islam, but rather bringing *sharia* back to the forefront of Islamic society, giving it a renewed sense of urgency, insisting to fellow Muslims that the root cause of all their troubles is that they have abandoned the laws of Allah and so must begin to tenaciously adhere to them.

That said, radical Muslims have further managed to exploit what the law maintains by making clever arguments. For instance, al-Qaeda’s number 2, Ayman al-Zawahiri, argues that, if offensive jihad is an obligation on the Muslim world—and it is—how much more is to be expected from Muslims when they are defending their territories from aggressors, the usual culprits being Israel or the U.S? He goes on to quote from prominent Islamic scholars, such as the medieval jurist, Ibn Taymiyya, who decreed centuries ago that, whenever “infidels” invade the Islamic world, the greatest obligation Muslims have, after faith itself, is to wage a defensive jihad. According to this popular definition, even women and children are required to participate—as evidenced among the Palestinians and in Iraq.

Being able to understand all this, being able to appreciate it without any conceptual or intellectual constraints is paramount for Americans to truly understand the nature of the enemy and his ultimate goals. Any attempts at formulating a proper strategic response without this necessary data is doomed to failure, especially in the long-term. Unfortunately, recent developments are indicative that the opposite is happening.

For example, far from closely examining Muslim doctrines and ideologies, a recent government memo, arguing that “words matter,” has all but banned several Arabic words that connote Muslim ideology and doctrine from formal discourse—such as *mujahid*, *jihadi*, *umma*, *sharia*, caliphate, and so on—asking analysts to rely primarily on generic terms, such as “terrorists.” However, without knowing the ideology that fuels any particular terrorist group one will be

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<sup>1</sup> The issue here is not which “version” of Islam is “correct.” The issue is that there *are* Muslims who have interpreted, do interpret, and always will interpret the mandates of Islam literally. As long as the Koran contains a plenitude of verses commanding Muslims to be in a perpetual state of war with non-Muslims (e.g., Koran 9:5, 9:29, 9:123), to “strike terror into the hearts of infidels” and “to strike their heads off” (Koran 8:60 and 47:4), all with assurances that “Allah has purchased the lives and possessions of the Believers in exchange for paradise: they fight in his cause, slaying and being slain” (9:111) — there will always be those faithful who take these words for what they plainly mean. Thus, even if the vast majority of Muslims are “moderates” and that, say, only a mere 20 percent of Muslims are “literalists,” that simply means that some 200 million Muslims in the world today are dedicated enemies of the infidel West. At any rate, when it comes to instilling terror, numbers are of no significance. It took only 19 to wreak great havoc and destruction on American soil on 9/11. It won’t take much more to duplicate that horrific day. That most Muslims are good, law-abiding citizens and that only a mere minority of the *umma*, say, 200 million, are dedicated to subjugating the world to *sharia* law is hardly assuring.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Al Qaeda Reader* for example, particularly the “theology” section.

severely handicapped in trying to formulate a counter-strategy. Censorship<sup>3</sup> hardly seems to be a strategic response at this juncture.

Finally, while Americans appear to be suffering from the inability to appreciate the idiosyncrasies of Islam's worldview, many radicals have proven themselves expert at understanding—and thus exploiting—the worldview of the liberal West. For example, al-Qaeda and many other radicals make it a point to intentionally use the language of political grievance when addressing Americans, only to abandon such language when talking to fellow Muslims, instead stressing only what Islamic law demands, such as jihad.

Before addressing the two, interconnected failures hampering the formulation of an effective strategy vis-à-vis radical Islam—education and epistemology—it is imperative that the reader better understand what *sharia* law is and how it is articulated, as this is pivotal to understanding how “knowledge” and hence “truth” is established within a purely Islamic paradigm.

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For all the talk that Islam is constantly being “misunderstood” or “misinterpreted” by radicals, the fact is, as opposed to most other religions, mainstream Islam is a very clearly defined faith admitting of little ambiguity (which is to be expected, as it is more concerned with human actions rather than metaphysical considerations).

In Sunni Islam, every law, practice, or ideology must ultimately be traced back to *usul al-fiqh* (or the “roots of jurisprudence”). These are, in order of authority, the Koran<sup>4</sup> (words of Allah), the *sunna*<sup>5</sup> (“example”) of Muhammad, *qiyas*<sup>6</sup> (the process of analogizing), and *ijma*<sup>7</sup> (the

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<sup>3</sup> The fact is, words do matter. Who those words are directed at matters even more. The world's Muslims aren't holding their breath to hear what sort of *Islamic* legitimacy the US government is about to confer on al-Qaeda, since it is not for non-Muslims to decide what is and is not Islamic in the first place. Americans, on the other hand, who are still asking “why do they hate us,” are in desperate need of understanding. Using accurate terminology is the first step.

<sup>4</sup> The Koran is the foundation of Islam. Not only are the words of the Koran understood to be inspired by Allah (much like the Bible is believed to be inspired by God for Christians and Jews); but traditional Islam teaches that the words themselves have been relayed verbatim from an uncreated and eternal slab in heaven which contains the same words, letter for letter—also in Arabic, which is understood to be the celestial language. Due to the Koran's status as *the* word of Allah, all of its commandments are understood to transcend time and space and are thus seen as binding once and for all. Most Muslims reject arguments suggesting that the commandments contained in the Koran apply only to the 7th century and thus need to be “reinterpreted” to suit today's realities. Needless to say, any commandment or prohibition found in the Koran—and these are many—are to be taken literally and become divine foundations of *sharia* law. For example, the Koran expressly forbids the eating of swine (5:3); pork is therefore forbidden to Muslims without exception.

<sup>5</sup> After the Koran, the *sunna* of the prophet arbitrates, based on the Koranic verse, “Truly, you have in the Messenger of Allah [Muhammad] an excellent example...” [33:21]. Ultimately, the importance of the *sunna* arises from the function of Muhammad as the founder of Islam—hence the authoritative if not inspired nature of his words and deeds. The word *sunna* can mean “example,” “pattern,” or “custom.” Based on the *hadith*, which contains thousands upon thousands of statements and deeds attributed to Muhammad, examples, patterns, and customs emerge. Depending then on the authenticity of any particular *hadith*, there are only six canonical collections, these *sunnas* go on to become codified as part of the *sharia*. Named after this second important root of jurisprudence, Sunni

consensus of the *umma* (international body of Muslims), especially the *ulema* (umbrella word for Islam's scholars, theologian, and jurists). Based on all of these, the *sharia* is established. In fact, according to Islamic jurisprudence, every conceivable human act is categorized as being either forbidden, discouraged, permissible, recommended, or obligatory. Such is the comprehensiveness—or totalitarianism—of the *sharia*.<sup>8</sup> This is important to understand since some of radical Islam's most intolerant positions are in fact grounded in *sharia* law.

On an epistemological level, then, “universal opinion” and “common sense” have little to do with Islam's notions of right and wrong. All that matters is what Allah (via the Koran) and his prophet Muhammad (through the *hadith*) have to say about any given subject; and how the *ulema*—literally, the “ones who know”—have codified it.

### **Educational Failures**

Even though U.S. military studies have traditionally valued and absorbed the texts of classical war doctrine—such as Clausewitz's *On War*, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, even the exploits of Alexander the Great as recorded in Arrian and Plutarch—Islamic war doctrine, which is just as if not more textually grounded, is totally ignored.

As recent as 2006—a full five years after the strikes of 9/11—former top Pentagon official William Gawthrop lamented that “the senior Service colleges of the Department of Defense had not incorporated into their curriculum a systematic study of Muhammad as a military or political leader. As a consequence, we still do not have an in-depth understanding of the war-fighting

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Muslims, who make up nearly 90% of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims, are thus extremely concerned with the words and deeds of Muhammad and strive to follow his example—often quite literally: the highly respected scholar, Ibn Hanbal, founder of one of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, forbade himself from eating watermelons simply because he found no instances of Muhammad eating any.

<sup>6</sup> Finding precedents and analogizing is a very important (though little understood) tool to articulating the *sharia* in the modern era. An example should clarify: based on the Koran and *sunna*, wine is forbidden to Muslims. However, neither the Koran nor the *sunna* expressly outlaw the consumption of beer—no doubt because it was generally unknown in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia. Through the process of analogy, then, beer, as well as all other forms of alcohol, become forbidden under Islamic law. The reasoning of the *ulema* is as follows: since the Koran and *sunna* obviously forbade wine because of its alcoholic, and thus intoxicating or harmful, qualities, clearly all other forms of alcohol must likewise be prohibited.

<sup>7</sup> If a question is not addressed by the Koran or *sunna*, nor is there any way to derive an analogy from them (through *qiyas*), the decision then rests with the majority's opinion, based on the *hadith*, “My community will never be in agreement over an error.” This should not, however, be confused with democracy, since consensus is called upon only as a last resort when the Koran and *sunna* are silent or ambiguous on an issue. In other words, consensus can never supersede or abrogate the authority of the Koran or *sunna*, though it may be needed to interpret them. Moreover, it is generally the consensus of the *ulema* who are learned in *sharia* law that ultimately bears any weight. That said, rulings based on the consensus of Muslim *ulema* are generally seen as binding.

<sup>8</sup>The concept of separation between religion and state—ingrained in the West—is therefore completely alien to Islam, further complicating American approaches at conceptualizing Islam: Taking for granted the notion of separation of church and state inherent to the West, Americans find it difficult to accept the notion that separating politics from religion is contrary to traditional Islamic principles and assume radicals are “misinterpreting” them.

doctrine laid down by Muhammad, how it might be applied today by an increasing number of Islamic groups, or how it might be countered.”

This is more ironic when one considers that, while classical military theories (Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, et al.) are still studied, the argument can be made that they have little practical value for today’s much changed landscape of warfare and diplomacy. The same cannot be said about Islam’s (little known in the West) doctrines of war. By having a “theological” quality, that is, by being grounded in a religion whose “divine” precepts transcend time and space, and are thus believed to be immutable, Islam’s war doctrines are considered applicable today no less than yesterday. While one can argue that learning how Alexander maneuvered his cavalry at the Battle of Guagamela in 331 BC is both academic and anachronistic, the same cannot be said of the exploits and stratagems of Muhammad—his “war sunna”—which still serves as an example to modern day jihadists, especially through the aforementioned juridical approach of analogizing (i.e., *qiyas*).

For instance and quite contrary to what is being taught in academia, certain terrorist strategies do, in fact, trace back to *sharia* rulings, such as the indiscriminate use of missile weaponry—perhaps in the guise of hijacked airplanes—even if women and children are accidentally killed.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, a close reading of *sharia* rulings suggests that when radicals refer to the controversial strategy of suicide-attacks as “martyrdom-operations,” they are not necessarily euphemizing. In his seminal treatise, “Jihad, Martyrdom, and the Killing of Innocents,” Ayman Zawahiri, for example, makes a cogent argument legitimizing suicide-attacks all through Islam’s *usul al-fiqh*.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from ignoring these well documented Islamist war-strategies, more troubling is the fact that there is total failure to appreciate Islam’s more long-term doctrines—such as the Abode of War versus the Abode of Islam dichotomy, which in essence maintains that Islam must be in a state of animosity vis-à-vis the infidel world and, whenever possible, must wage wars until all infidel territory has been brought under Islamic rule. In fact, this dichotomy of hostility is

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<sup>9</sup> Even the reckless strikes of 9/11 — where mostly civilians, including women and children, were killed — are justified for al Qaeda through Islam. While it is true that Islam is generally against the killing of non-combatants such as women and children, there are certain exceptions to this generalization, and al Qaeda often cites them to validate 9/11. For instance, Muhammad authorized his followers to use catapults during their siege of the town of Taif in 630, though it was well known that women and children were sheltered there. Also, when asked if it was permissible to launch night raids or set fire to the fortifications of the infidels even if women and children were among them, the prophet is said to have responded, “They are from among them” (see *Sahih Muslim* B19N4321).

<sup>10</sup> See *The Al Qaeda Reader*, p. 141-171, where Zawahiri quotes numerous *hadiths* of 7<sup>th</sup> century mujahidin intentionally putting themselves in positions where death was all but certain, including some who were goaded on by Muhammad, who promised them paradise if they died. Zawahiri further utilizes the juridical tool of *qiyas* by analogizing that, whereas suicide is a great sin, fighting to the death in the jihad is the most worthy endeavor. The dividing line, then, is *intention*: whether one literally kills himself (such as in a suicide-bombing) or is killed by another in the jihad is irrelevant. *Why* one wills his own death is all-important. Here the end clearly justifies the means: Writes, Zawahiri, “Thus the deciding factor in all these situations is one and the same: the intention—is it to service Islam [martyrdom] or is it out of depression and despair [suicide]?” There is also an anachronistic element at work here that sides with Zawahiri’s view. Considering that there was no technology in the guise of explosives in the early years of Islam, there was no way for a Muslim to inflict damage on the enemy by causing his own death. Thus even if suicide-bombings are legitimate, there is no way to find a precedent for them in the traditional texts of Islam.

unambiguously codified under Islam's worldview and, as aforementioned, is deemed a *fard kifaya*—that is, an obligation on the entire Muslim body that can only be fulfilled as long as some Muslims actively uphold it.

The way the word “jihad” has been treated in academia is another case in point. Islam's earliest theologians unanimously agreed that jihad was simply offensive warfare with the express purpose of spreading Islamic rule — a path shown by Muhammad himself, and then by his companions, the “rightly-guided” caliphs, who conquered much of the Old World in the name of Islam. There is a good reason why all early works of English-language scholarship have always translated “jihad” as “holy war.”

Regardless, the vast majority of academics—particularly those in search of tenure—are in the habit of teaching that the concept of “jihad” has nothing to do with “holy war,” but that it simply means “to strive” — as in to strive to be “a better student, a better colleague, a better business partner” per one Islamic studies professor, Bruce Lawrence. This widely held view is founded on an oft-quoted *hadith* that has Muhammad telling a group of mujahidin returning from war that, “You have returned from the lesser jihad [warfare to spread Islam] to the greater jihad [warfare against one's own vices].” This one *hadith* has all but come to define jihad for the academic community.

Placing so much emphasis on this one *hadith*, however, is either disingenuous or ignorant. Though there are thousands of *hadiths*, there are only six canonical collections that Sunnis consider trustworthy. This *hadith* does not occur in any of those six. On the other hand, the most authentic of the six *hadith* collections, the ninth-century *Sahih Bukari*—second in authority only to the Koran—mentions jihad 199 times, *all* in the context of warfare against non-Muslims in an effort to spread Islam, or, as known in Arabic, *jihad fi sabil Allah*. More ironic, even if that lesser-greater jihad *hadith* was canonical, it does not negate the military jihad but rather simply calls it “lesser jihad.”

Academics tend to also be fond of playing semantic games. Scholars of Arabic insist that the word “jihad” literally means “to struggle” and thus clearly has nothing to do with “holy war.” While literally true, this line of reasoning totally ignores the historical and textual contexts in which the word jihad predominantly appears — all which revolve around “holy war” — and is therefore nothing short of disingenuous.<sup>11</sup> As Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum, puts it:

“It is an intellectual scandal that, since September 11, 2001, scholars at American universities have repeatedly and all but unanimously issued public statements that avoid or whitewash the

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<sup>11</sup> Indeed, many are the words that, while denoting one thing, are only understood connotatively. Imagine going to Arabic speakers and adamantly explaining to them that the English words “boyfriend” and “girlfriend” mean nothing more than what they denote: a boy or girl who is simply a “friend.” Considering that the vast majority of English speakers understand by those two terms something quite more than a friend, would that not be a dishonest explanation to the non-English-speaking Arab? Americans who don't speak Arabic are being duped in the same way. Just as a “boy/girl friend” is a very specific *type* of friend, so too is jihad a very specific *type* of struggle — a lasting war in order to establish Islam supreme, “until all chaos ceases and all religion belongs to Allah alone,” in the words of the Koran.

primary meaning of jihad in Islamic law and Muslim history. It is quite as if historians of medieval Europe were to deny that the word "crusade" ever had martial overtones, instead pointing to such terms as "crusade on hunger" or "crusade against drugs" to demonstrate that the term signifies an effort to improve society."

Yet if these academic failures have traditionally been predominant in the civilian sector, they have clearly come to also infiltrate the military. For example, a faculty member of the U.S. Army War College, one Sherifa Zuhur, recently published what has been criticized as an "apologia" for Hamas—a radical Islamist group that makes no secret of its desire to annihilate Israel and which is listed as a terrorist organization by the United States. Among other things, she described Hamas as being "misunderstood" and "villainized." Defense expert Mark Perry notes "It's worse than you think. They have curtailed the curriculum so that their students are not exposed to radical Islam. Akin to denying students access to Marx during the Cold War."

This last assertion is a reminder that, though there are today many Islamic studies departments in the universities, one will be sorely pressed to find any courses dealing with the most pivotal and relevant topics of today—such as Islamic jurisprudence and what it has to say about jihad or the concept of Abode of Islam versus the Abode of War—no doubt due to the fact that these topics possess troubling international implications and are best buried. Instead, the would-be student will be inundated with courses dealing with the evils of "Orientalism" and colonialism, followed by a focus on gender studies. Whenever Islam is broached as a subject unto itself, it is often done in the most apologetic manner, as evinced by the linguistically false cliché: "Islam is peace." In fact, Islam means "submit" or "submission."

Before implementing the most basic strategy in warfare—Sun Tzu's ancient dictum, *know thy enemy*—it behooves one to first *acknowledge* his enemy. Yet, due to the pervasiveness of these academic failures, it was only inevitable that epistemological failures would follow. Without accurate information, the U.S. is philosophically unprepared to properly address the specter of radical Islam in the modern world.

### **Epistemological Failures**

To better appreciate the idiosyncratic nature of *sharia*, as well as understand why non-Muslims face various epistemic hurdles when trying to comprehend Islam's worldview, consider the concept of deceit, which one may otherwise take for granted is universally condemned as unethical. In fact, according to *sharia*, deception<sup>12</sup> is not only permitted in certain situations but is sometimes deemed *obligatory*. For instance, not only are Muslims who must choose between either recanting Islam or being put to death permitted to lie by pretending to have apostatized; a number of jurists have actually decreed that, according to Koran 4:29, which counsels Muslims to not "destroy themselves," Muslims are obligated to lie; if they do not, they sin.

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<sup>12</sup> The primary Koranic verse sanctioning deception vis-à-vis non-Muslims states: "Let believers [Muslims] not take for friends and allies infidels [non-Muslims] instead of believers. Whoever does this shall have no relationship left with Allah—unless you but guard yourselves against them, taking precautions" (3:28; other verses referenced by the ulema supportive of deception include 2:173; 2:185; 4:29; 16:106; 22:78; 40:28). "Taking precautions" and "guarding against them" are usually interpreted as deceiving infidels.

This is the Islamic doctrine of *taqiyya*, which, in varying degrees, revolves around deceiving the enemy. According to the authoritative Arabic text, *Al-Taqiyya fi Al-Islam*, “*Taqiyya* [deception] is of fundamental importance in Islam. Practically every Islamic sect agrees to it and practices it. We can go so far as to say that the practice of *taqiyya* is mainstream in Islam, and that those few sects not practicing it diverge from the mainstream.... *Taqiyya* is very prevalent in Islamic politics, especially in the modern era [p.7; my own translation].”<sup>13</sup>

Deception has such a prominent role that renowned Muslim scholar Ibn al-Arabi declares: “[I]n the *hadith*, practicing deceit in war is well demonstrated. Indeed, its need is more stressed than [the need for] courage.”<sup>14</sup>

Al-Tabari’s (d. 923) famous *Tafsir* (exegesis of the Koran) is a standard and authoritative reference work in the entire Muslim world. Regarding Koran 3:28, he writes: “If you [Muslims] are under their [infidels’] authority, fearing for yourselves, behave loyally to them, *with your tongue*, while harboring inner animosity for them.... Allah has forbidden believers from being friendly or on intimate terms with the infidels in place of believers—except when infidels are above them [in authority]. In such a scenario, let them *act* friendly towards them.”

Regarding 3:28, Ibn Kathir (d. 1373, second in authority only to Tabari) writes, “Whoever at any time or place fears their [infidels’] evil, may protect himself through outward show.” As proof of this, he quotes prophet Muhammad’s close companion, Abu Darda, who said “Let us smile to the face of some people [non-Muslims] while our hearts curse them”; another companion, al-Hassan, said, “Doing *taqiyya* [deceiving] is acceptable till the Day of Judgment [i.e., in perpetuity].”

Other prominent *ulema*, such as al-Qurtubi, al-Razi, and al-Arabi have extended *taqiyya* to cover deeds. In other words, Muslims can *behave* like infidels—including by bowing down and worshipping idols and crosses, offering false testimony, even exposing fellow Muslims’ weak spots to the infidel enemy—anything short of actually killing a Muslim.

None of this should be surprising considering that Muhammad himself—whose example as the “most perfect human” is to be tenaciously followed—took an expedient view to lying. It is well known, for instance, that Muhammad permitted lying in three situations: to reconcile two or more quarreling parties; to one’s wife; and in war.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Some erroneously believe that *taqiyya* is an exclusively Shia doctrine: As a minority group interspersed among their traditional enemies, the much more numerous Sunnis, Shias have historically had more “reason” to dissemble. Ironically, however, Sunnis living in the West today find themselves in a similar situation, as *they* are now the minority surrounded by *their* historic enemies—Christian infidels. And thus, from a Muslim point of view, today the Sunnis have as much reason to deceive as the Shias have historically.

<sup>14</sup> *Al Qaeda Reader*, 142.

<sup>15</sup> Sahih Muslim B32N6303, deemed an “authentic” *hadith*. As for our chief concern here—deception in war—during the Battle of the Trench (627) which pitted Muhammad and his followers against several non-Muslim tribes (collectively known as “the Confederates”), one of these Confederates, Naim bin Masud, went to the Muslim camp and converted to Islam. When Muhammad discovered that the Confederates were unaware of their co-tribalist’s conversion, he counseled Masud to return and try somehow to get the Confederates to abandon the siege—“For,” Muhammad assured him, “war is deceit.” Masud returned to the Confederates without their knowing that he had



The Western reader may find these legalistic interpretations and colorful anecdotes from the prophet's life curious but ultimately unconvincing. Here, again, we are entered into the tricky realm of epistemology: every civilization has its own particular sources, physical or metaphysical, whence knowledge, and hence "truth," are articulated. As explained above, for the Islamic world, *sharia*—specifically the words of the Koran/Muhammad—forms the basis of all truth and reality, and therefore must be accepted as they are, on faith, without excessive rationalizing.

There is also a troubling philosophical aspect to *taqiyya*. Anyone who truly believes that no less an authority than God justifies and, through his prophet's example, sometimes even *encourages* deception, will not experience any ethical qualms or dilemmas about lying. This is especially true if the human mind is indeed a tabula rasa shaped by environment and education: Deception becomes second nature.

Consider the case of Ali Mohammad—bin Laden's "first trainer" and longtime al-Qaeda operative. Despite being entrenched in the highest echelons of the terror network, his [confidence at dissembling](#) enabled him to become a CIA agent and FBI informant for years. People who knew him regarded him "with fear and awe for his incredible self-confidence, his inability to be

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"switched sides," and began giving his former kin and allies bad advice. He also went to great lengths to instigate quarrels between the various tribes until, thoroughly distrusting each other, they disbanded, lifting the siege from the Muslims, and thereby saving Islam in its embryonic period (*Al-Taqiyya Fi Al-Islam*; also, Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*, the earliest biography of Muhammad). More demonstrative of the legitimacy of deception vis-à-vis infidels is the following anecdote. A poet, [Kab bin al-Ashraf](#), offended Muhammad by making derogatory verse concerning Muslim women. So Muhammad exclaimed in front of his followers: "Who will kill this man who has hurt Allah and his prophet?" A young Muslim named Muhammad bin Maslama volunteered, but with the caveat that, in order to get close enough to Kab to assassinate him, he be allowed to lie to the poet. Muhammad [agreed](#). Maslama traveled to Kab, began denigrating Islam and Muhammad, carrying on this way till his disaffection became convincing enough that Kab took him into his confidences. Soon thereafter, Maslama appeared with another Muslim and, while Kab's guard was down, assaulted and killed him. Ibn Sa'ad's version reports that they ran to Muhammad with Kab's head, to which the latter cried "Allahu Akbar!" (God is great!) It also bears mentioning that the entire sequence of Koranic revelations are a testimony to *taqiyya*; and since Allah is believed to be the revealer of these verses, he ultimately is seen as the perpetrator of deceit—which is not surprising since Allah himself is described in the Koran as the best "deceiver" or "schemer" (3:54, 8:30, 10:21). This phenomenon revolves around the fact that the Koran contains both peaceful and tolerant verses, as well as violent and intolerant ones. The *ulema* were baffled as to which verses to codify into *sharia*'s worldview—the one, for instance, that states there is no coercion in religion (2:256), or the ones that command believers to fight all non-Muslims till they either convert or at least submit to Islam (8:39, 9:5, 9:29)? To get out of this quandary, the *ulema* developed the doctrine of abrogation (*naskh*, supported by Koran 2:106) which essentially states that verses "revealed" later in Muhammad's career take precedence over the earlier ones, whenever there is a contradiction. For example, the vast majority of the *ulema* have a consensus that Koran 9:5, famously known as *ayat al-saif*—the "sword verse"—[has abrogated](#) some 124 of the more peaceful Meccan verses. But why the contradiction in the first place? The standard answer has been that, since in the early years of Islam, Muhammad and his community were far outnumbered by the infidels and idolaters, a message of peace and co-existence was in order. However, after he migrated to Medina and grew in military strength and numbers, the violent and intolerant verses were "revealed," inciting Muslims to go on the offensive—now that they were capable of doing so. According to this view, quite standard among the *ulema*, one can only conclude that the peaceful Meccan verses were ultimately a ruse to buy Islam time till it became sufficiently strong enough to implement its "true" verses which demand conquest. Or, as traditionally understood and implemented by Muslims themselves, when the latter are weak, they should preach and behave according to the Meccan verses (peace, tolerance); when strong, they should go on the offensive, according to the Medinan verses (war and conquest).

intimidated, absolute ruthless determination to destroy the enemies of Islam, and his zealous belief in the tenets of militant Islamic fundamentalism.” Indeed, this sentence sums it all: for a “zealous belief” in Islam’s “tenets,” which, as seen, legitimize deception, will certainly go a long way in creating “incredible self-confidence” when lying.

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The fact that Islam legitimizes deceit during war cannot be all that surprising. After all, non-Muslim thinkers and philosophers, such as Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, and Hobbes all justified deceit in war. The crucial difference, however, is that, once again—this cannot be stressed enough—according to all four recognized schools of Sunni jurisprudence, war against the infidel goes on in *perpetuity*, until “all chaos ceases, and all religion belongs to Allah” (Koran 8:39). In its entry on jihad, the definitive *Encyclopaedia of Islam* simply states:

“The duty of the *jihad* exists as long as the universal domination of Islam has not been attained. Peace with non-Muslim nations is, therefore, a provisional state of affairs only; the chance of circumstances alone can justify it temporarily. Furthermore there can be no question of genuine peace treaties with these nations; only truces, whose duration ought not, in principle, to exceed ten years, are authorised. But even such truces are precarious, inasmuch as they can, before they expire, be repudiated unilaterally should it appear more profitable for Islam to resume the conflict.”<sup>16</sup>

Celebrated Muslim historian and philosopher, Ibn Khaldun (d.1406), wrote: “In the Muslim community, holy war [jihad] is a religious *duty*, because of the universalism of the Muslim mission and the *obligation* to convert everybody to Islam either by persuasion or by force. The other religious groups [specifically Christianity and Judaism] did not have a universal mission, and the holy war was not a religious duty for them, save only for purposes of defense... But Islam is under *obligation* to gain power over other nations.”

Amazingly, and thanks in part to the aforementioned educational failures, no matter how many authoritative texts of Islam make clear that jihad is a militant obligation, no matter how many

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<sup>16</sup> This concept is highlighted by the fact that, based on the ten year treaty of Hudaibiya (628), ratified between Muhammad and his Quraish opponents in Mecca, ten years is, theoretically, the maximum amount of time Muslims can be at peace with infidels. Based on Muhammad’s example of annulling the treaty after two years, (by citing a Quraish infraction that could have been punished separately), the sole function of the “peace-treaty” (or *hudna*) is to buy weakened Muslims time to regroup before going on the offensive once more. Moreover, according to [a canonical hadith](#), Muhammad said, “If I take an oath and later find something else better, I do what is better and break my oath.” The prophet further encouraged Muslims to [do the same](#): “If you ever take an oath to do something and later on you find that something else is better, then you should expiate your oath and do what is better.” This is more obvious when one considers that, in the history of the modern era, every single time Muslims have reached out for “peace,” it has always been when *they* were in a weakened condition vis-à-vis “infidels”—that is, when they, not their non-Muslim competitors/counterparts, benefit from the peace. This is the lesson of the last two centuries of Muslim/Western interaction, wherein the former have been militarily inferior and thus beholden to the latter. When the Islamic world was more or as powerful as the non-Islamic world, offensive jihads were the norm, and are historically responsible for the vast majority of the modern Islamic world’s territories. From Morocco to India, all the territory in between was conquered by force and subjugated to Islam during the early Islamic conquests (c. 636-750). Only those few nations that are on the periphery of the Islamic world, such as Indonesia and Somalia, converted to Islam over time and more or less peacefully.

authoritative Muslims—past and present—insist on this point, the Western mind, so accustomed to assuming that the “normal” state of affairs is such that there is a clear separation between religion and politics, and that all this “discontent” is merely garbed in religious talk but is ultimately a byproduct of political grievances, still cannot take seriously or embrace the implications of Islam’s straightforward worldview vis-à-vis non-Muslims, that is, infidels. Formulating any long-term strategies must begin here.

For instance, the fact remains: If Islam must be in a constant state of war with the non-Muslim world, which need not be physical, as the *ulema* have classified several non-violent forms of jihad, such as “jihad-of-the-pen” (propaganda), and “money-jihad” (economic); and if Muslims are permitted to lie and feign loyalty, even affection, to the infidel simply to further their war efforts—what does one make of *any* Muslim overtures of peace, tolerance, or dialogue?

This leads to another epistemic hurdle for non-Muslims, as captured by the following question I am often asked: “If this is the case, if Muslims must always wage war, why have there been long periods of relative peace between Muslims and non-Muslims?” The problem with this otherwise plausible objection is that most Westerners have a limited understanding of history, and tend to focus on the modern era, when, if anything, Westerners have played a more aggressive role—specifically via colonialism. In fact, the last time Muslims made a major offensive vis-à-vis the Abode of War, specifically the West, has been centuries ago.

Yet this overlooks the fact that, in the last few centuries, Muslims have been simply *incapable* of going on the offensive, whether they wanted to or not. Due to this quirk of history, Americans tend to assume that Muslims do not *want* to go on the offensive, but rather live in peace with their non-Muslim neighbors—a purely Western, secular worldview. History demonstrates otherwise: whenever Muslims have been stronger than their non-Muslim neighbors, they have always gone on the offensive. From the inception of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century to the waning of the Ottoman empire, Islam has constantly been on the offensive—until it was beaten on the battlefield c. the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>17</sup>

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It should be noted that, if Americans are having a hard time understanding the epistemic mindset of Islam, radical Muslims have demonstrated their mastery of the West’s epistemology, and continue exploiting it against the West. Consider the following anecdote: After a group of prominent Muslims wrote a letter to Americans saying that Islam is a peaceful religion that wishes to co-exist with others, seeking only to “live and let live,” Osama bin Laden, thinking no non-Muslim would see his retort, castigated them as follows:

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<sup>17</sup> One need not even study history; where non-Muslim minorities live among Muslim majorities, this Muslim impetus to dominate is evident: while living in constant social subjugation, or, in Western parlance, “discrimination,” (according to Koran 9:29) non-Muslims are also sporadically persecuted and sometimes killed—such as the Christian Copts of Egypt who, after recently assembling for prayer in a condemned factory, were surrounded by some [20,000 rioting Muslims](#) hollering the Muslim war-cry, “Allah Akbar,” while hurling stones at the Copts.

“As to the relationship between Muslims and infidels, this is summarized by the Most High’s Word: ‘We [Muslims] renounce you [non-Muslims]. Enmity and hate shall forever reign between us — till you believe in Allah alone’ [Koran 60:4]. So there is an enmity, evidenced by fierce hostility from the heart. And this fierce hostility — that is, battle — ceases *only* if the infidel submits to the authority of Islam, or if his blood is forbidden from being shed [i.e., a *dhimmi*], or *if Muslims are at that point in time weak and incapable* [i.e., *taqiyya*]. But if the hate at any time extinguishes from the heart, this is great apostasy! ... Such, then, is the basis and foundation of the relationship between the infidel and the Muslim. Battle, animosity, and hatred — directed from the Muslim to the infidel — is the foundation of our religion. And we consider this a justice and kindness to them.”<sup>18</sup>

However, when addressing Americans directly, bin Laden’s tone drastically changes; he lists any number of “grievances” for fighting the U.S.—from Palestinian oppression, to the Western exploitation of women and U.S. failure to sign the Kyoto protocol to protect the environment—never once alluding to fighting the U.S. simply because it is an infidel entity that must be subjugated.

This is of course a clear instance of *taqiyya*, as bin Laden is not only waging a physical jihad, but one of propaganda. Convincing a secular West (whose epistemology does not allow for the notion of religious conquest) that the current conflict is entirely its fault only garners him and his cause more sympathy; conversely, he also knows that if Americans were to realize that, all political grievances aside—real or imagined—according to Islam’s worldview, nothing short of their submission to Islam can ever bring peace, his propaganda campaign would be quickly compromised. Hence the constant need to lie, “for war,” as their prophet asserted, “is deceit.”<sup>19</sup>

Ayman Zawahiri follows the same strategy. Speaking to the many “under-privileged” of the world in one of his interviews, the terrorist-doctor declared: “That’s why I want blacks in America, people of color, American Indians, Hispanics, and all the weak and oppressed in North and South America, in Africa and Asia, and all over the world, to know that when we wage jihad in Allah’s path, we aren’t waging jihad to lift oppression from Muslims only; we are waging jihad to lift oppression from *all* mankind, because Allah has ordered us never to accept oppression, whatever it may be... This is why I want every oppressed one on the face of the earth to know that our victory over America and the Crusading West — with Allah’s permission — is a victory for them, because they shall be freed from the most powerful tyrannical force in the history of mankind.”

Ironically, Zawahiri is not lying when he talks about “lifting oppression from all mankind” and al Qaeda’s desire to “free” humanity from “the most powerful tyrannical force in the history of mankind.” Rather, once again, here we have a conflict between the Western notion of “freedom” and “oppression” and radical Islam’s notion. For radicals such as al-Qaeda, the dichotomy between “freedom” and “oppression” is wholly founded on whether *sharia* law is made supreme

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<sup>18</sup> *Al Qaeda Reader*, 43.

<sup>19</sup> See my essay, “[An Analysis of Al-Qa’ida’s Worldview: Reciprocal Treatment or Religious Obligation](#),” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Volume 12, No. 3 - September 2008, for a lengthy juxtaposition of bin Laden’s statements to the West and to fellow Muslims which totally contradict each other.

in the world; that is, whether every single man, woman, and child — both Muslim and non-Muslim — lives under the mandates of Islamic law. If they do, they are considered “free”; if not, as the case is today, the mass of humanity is considered to be “oppressed.”

Osama bin Laden himself makes this clear in one of his more arcane documents written for Muslim eyes only: “Muslims and especially the learned amongst them, should spread *sharia* law to the world — that and nothing else. Not [secular] laws under the ‘umbrella of justice, morality, and rights’ as understood by the masses. No, the *sharia* of Islam is the foundation....For practically everything valued by the immoral West is condemned under *sharia* law.... As for [the concept of] oppression, the *only* oppression is to forsake them [Americans] in their infidelities, and not launch a jihad against them till they submit to the faith — as the Prophet did with them.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus by portraying al-Qaeda as a “liberating organization” or a band of “freedom fighters, Zawahiri is technically not lying; he is being disingenuous.”<sup>21</sup> “Blacks in America, people of color, American Indians, Hispanics, and all the weak and oppressed in North and South America, in Africa and Asia, and all over the world” certainly do not have *sharia* law in mind whenever Zawahiri sings praises about freedom and the need for the world to unite and lift off the yoke of “American oppression.” This is especially the case since *sharia* law specifies a number of draconian restrictions and double-standards for all those who choose not to convert to Islam: second-class *dhimmi* status for Christians and Jews (in accordance to Koran 9:29); death for polytheists — those whom Zawahiri would otherwise implore for aid in Africa and Asia (in accordance to Koran 9:5).

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### Strategic Suggestions

It should be acknowledged that, educational failures exacerbate epistemological failures, and vice-versa, leading to a perpetual cycle where necessary knowledge is not merely ignored, but not even acknowledged in the first place. When American universities fail to teach Islamic doctrine and history accurately, a flawed epistemology permeates society at large. And since new students and new professors come from this already conditioned-towards- Islam society, not only do they not question the lack of accurate knowledge and education, they perpetuate it.

Thus Americans must learn to transcend their subjective worldview and secular philosophies and understand Islam the way mainstream, traditional Muslims understand it—no matter how much doing so may contradict their preconceived notions. Universities should unabashedly teach Islam the way Muslims teach it; jihad should mean jihad—not a “struggle to be a better business partner.”

The government should not seek to censor language when discussing radical Islam, as language has a direct bearing on knowledge. Political correctness must be eliminated. Inter-faith

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<sup>20</sup> *Al Qaeda Reader*, 32-33.

<sup>21</sup> Another aspect of *taqiyya* is *kitman*, or “passive deception,” that is, not forthrightly providing the complete picture.

dialogues should continue to be encouraged; however, not to stress (often strained) commonalities, but to honestly and openly question differences. Books on Islamic doctrine and jihad written in Arabic need to be translated in droves and made available to American students.<sup>22</sup> If taken, such steps would instrumentally lend themselves to the formulation of much more strategic responses to countering the violent ideologies of radical Islam.

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<sup>22</sup> When I worked in the African and Middle Eastern division of the Library of Congress, I was amazed at the amount of Arabic books there were, many of which—such as *The Al Qaeda Reader*—if translated, would serve as an invaluable resource for formulating counter-strategy. A list of such books should be compiled and they should be translated.